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South Mountain Freeway goes nowhere at session

By Mike Branom
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Resident Dale Leutenegger asks Arizona Department of Transportation officials questions regarding the proposed South Mountain Loop 202 during a meeting on Wednesday for the Lakewood HOA.

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More than two decades after planning began for the Loop 202 South Mountain Freeway, it's not concrete that has hardened but attitudes.

Wednesday night marked the first meeting in years between transportation officials and residents of Ahwatukee Foothills, where the proposed freeway would cut west from Interstate 10 toward the West Valley.



But it was apparent from the start that in the interim, nothing has changed: People still hate the idea.

During the Arizona Department of Transportation's presentation, a consultant mentioned an option was to do nothing. That news was met with a burst of cheers and applause, despite the Valley's crippling traffic.

The fate of Loop 202 has been debated since the mid-1980s, when the region's current network of freeways was nothing more than lines on a highway planner's map. Since then, the entire system has been constructed, save for a 4-mile stretch in east Mesa, but the South Mountain Freeway remains "under study."

During that time, the estimated cost has ballooned to a current estimated \$1.7 billion — and that sum most likely will climb again when ADOT releases an updated

projection in September.

The 22-mile highway, under the current proposal, would run through Ahwatukee Foothills along Pecos Road, turn northwest on land owned by the Gila River Indian Community and then head north along 55th Avenue before joining I-10 in west Phoenix.

A benefit to the freeway, planners said, would be to act as a bypass around the crowded downtown area. But they also admit the route could result in the demolition of about 300 to 800 Ahwatukee Foothills homes, depending on whether the freeway is built above or below ground level.

Adding to the difficulties in getting a construction go-ahead, ADOT spokesman Tim Tait said an environmental impact study has been delayed by the Gila tribe's recent designation of South Mountain as a sacred place.

According to the presentation, the freeway would require cutting through two ridges at a depth of 120 feet and width of 600 feet.

These obstacles explain why Tait used the word "if" to the crowd of about 150 at the Pecos Community Center.


"We're not there yet," Tait admitted.

Complicating ADOT's plans is the skyrocketing price of gasoline.

With a statewide average per gallon of regular unleaded at \$4.08, people are driving less while looking to save money via alternative travel modes. For example, it's tough to find a spot to leave one's car at Ahwatukee Foothills' park-and-ride lot before catching a bus.

Resident Theresa Territo asked: "What could we use this money for instead? Can we find a greener, more appropriate solution?"



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